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Time orientation and engagement with social networking sites: A cross-cultural study in Austria, China and Uruguay

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of time orientation in predicting users' participation patterns in social networking sites (SNS). A series of structural paths leading from time orientation to users' intention to interact and finally to actual engagement with SNS is compared across three countries: Austria, China and Uruguay. After assuring measurement invariance for the constructs of the study, differences in structural paths across counties are assessed. Findings show that future orientation has a positive effect on a user's intentions to actively generate content and passively monitor SNS. These relationships are invariant across countries. Present orientation positively influences intention to actively interact in Austria and Uruguay. Finally, the relationship between users' active intention and engagement is strongest for Austria, scoring high on the individualism dimension, as compared to China and Uruguay.

1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, Instagram or WeChat continue growing in popularity worldwide. Users spend almost two hours daily on SNS (GlobalWebIndex, 2016). SNS enable people to develop and maintain social relations across geographical boundaries and are platforms for sharing user generated and third party content, including product reviews and recommendations. The ability to share and access content has turned SNS into important marketing instruments for corporations. But, although SNS are of increasing importance to consumers and companies alike, many of these sites experience unsatisfactory active user participation (GlobalWebIndex, 2016). Even though their subscriber base is constantly expanding, the number of users who create content does not increase accordingly (GlobalWebIndex, 2014). Thus, it is becoming clear that not all users actively engage with this new type of social networking.

As the influence of SNS continues to grow, it is important for marketers to understand how different consumer segments produce and consume content. In this respect, the investigation of users' motivations to participate in SNS (e.g. Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, & Strobl, 2015) and their actual network behaviors (e.g. Goldsmith, Pagani, & Lu, 2013) has triggered much attention. Recently, researchers are beginning to recognize the role of individual trait variables, such as consumer innovativeness, privacy concerns and

identity expressiveness in explaining SNS usage behaviors (Pagani, Hofacker, & Goldsmith, 2011; Park, Jun, & Lee, 2015). While research in this area is still in its infancy, it is becoming obvious that individual differences among users may help explain many important aspects of their online behavior, including SNS engagement.

Given the time consumers spend on SNS is so substantial,¹ we argue that an important individual trait likely to influence SNS behavior, notably a consumer's individual time orientation, has so far been overlooked. To address this research gap, we examine the effect of individuals' time orientation on their intention to interact on SNS through generating content (active engagement) and on their intention to simply browse and monitor their network (passive engagement). More specifically, we conceptualize time orientation as an individual trait, which reflects a predisposition towards the past, the present or the future, and pursue two research objectives: 1) we aim to identify how perceptions of time might drive intentions to participate in SNS and in turn shape levels of engagement with SNS and 2), we explore the role of culture in these relationships. Examining the role of time orientation in predicting participation patterns in SNS extends the existing literature on the drivers of SNS engagement. Moreover, by exploring the relationship between time orientation and SNS engagement in a cross-cultural setting, this study contributes to the literature on the role of culture in online behavior.

In particular, we aim to shed more light on the important aspect of

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¹ 30% of time spent online is on social networking (GlobalWebIndex, 2016)

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differences in SNS engagement between countries. Although the global expansion of SNS seems to transcend geographical-, social- and cultural-boundaries and appears to mirror the inherent desire of all people to relate to others (Park & Jun, 2003), substantial cross-country differences remain. Recently, Euromonitor reported that emerging market consumers are nearly two times more likely to use social media to interact with brands compared to consumers in developed markets. The existence of various country specific SNS, such as Weibo in China² or Line in Thailand and other Asian markets is an indicator of differences in engagement across cultures (Choi, Jung, & Lee, 2013). Meanwhile, cross-cultural studies on SNS participation patterns revealed significant differences across national cultures (e.g. Cho & Park, 2013; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Park et al., 2015). For instance, collectivistic cultures with short-term orientation in Latin America communicate in a more elaborate way and engage more actively in self-presentation activities within SNS, compared to collectivistic cultures with long-term orientation in Asia (Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). Therefore, we argue that the role of time orientation as a potential driver of intentions to participate in SNS could be affected by country specific features, such as cultural values. This conceptualization of time orientation as a personality trait, which is also a culture bound construct, is also in line with Wang, Rieger, and Hens (2016). Consequently, we conduct our survey in three culturally distant countries, Austria, China and Uruguay.

Below, we begin with a review of the pertinent literature on the influence of time orientation and culture on SNS engagement. The methodology, analysis and results of the study follow. Next, we discuss our findings and highlight their theoretical and practical implications. This informs SNS providers and managers how to develop strategies aiming to boost users' engagement. The paper closes with an acknowledgement of its limitations and an outline of future research avenues.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social networking sites

Social networking sites are virtual communities allowing people to connect and interact with each other, building social relationships. Consumers' usage of SNS is becoming an essential element in marketing decision-making (Hoffman & Novak, 2012) and rapidly increasing membership makes them attractive for targeted advertising. Viral marketing campaigns also benefit from the wide range of consumers that SNS are able to reach worldwide (Gunawan & Huarng, 2015). SNS emphasize user interaction and involvement, as these are the keys to a successful social networking website. In fact, understanding how people behave when they connect to SNS is important for a number of reasons. First, studies on SNS user behavior permit a performance evaluation of the websites and may result in suggestions for better design or advertisement placement policies. Second, researching what drives engagement with SNS and exploiting users' interactions to spread content quickly and widely is important in viral marketing. However, SNS do not only aid the communication policy of companies. Recognizing the important role of SNS throughout the entire cycle of product development, market introduction and adoption, companies are constantly exploring ways of integrating SNS into their entire marketing mix.

Academics and practitioners are increasingly focusing on the concept of engagement in social media platforms (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2016). In this context, attempts to develop typologies of social media engagement have recently been published (e.g. Dolan et al., 2016; Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013;

Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). These typologies mainly suggest that engagement may occur at varying levels, such as high and low (Malthouse et al., 2013; Muntinga et al., 2011) or active and passive (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Tsai & Men, 2014). However, failing to identify exactly which specific actions within SNS belong to either high or low engagement levels, renders the former approach difficult to implement. As a consequence, the most frequently used approach by scholars in the field is the distinction between active and passive engagement levels.

Dholakia et al. (2004) explore SNS and evaluate factors that influence participation behavior (frequency and duration). Based on their findings, two non-mutually exclusive types of users exist within SNS. The "active" ones, who interact by exchanging opinions, sharing ideas and experiences, posting comments, personal information and knowledge, and the "passive" ones, who merely rely on browsing, monitoring and observing ongoing discussions. While the first category of users is driven by strong intentions to produce content and 'provide information', the second user category is motivated by the intention to consume content and 'get information'. Similarly, Men and Tsai (2013) define users' engagement in social media as a two-level hierarchical behavioral construct, active level (content contributing via posting, uploading, responding to comments, etc.) and passive level (viewing other users' activities, reading updates, etc.). Based on these conceptualizations, both categories are using the connectivity provided by SNS to satisfy different needs. However, producing content online (active network engagement) and consuming content online (passive network engagement) are both fundamental elements of the ongoing activity in SNS. Active users generate SNS content through their contributions, comments and shares, which in turn stimulates more interaction. Operational success of SNS depends on preserving and promoting this cycle of content creation, consumption and circulation. Therefore, SNS need to encourage their members to not just passively consume content, but also actively create new content (Pagani et al., 2011).

Previous research suggests measuring social media usage, and hence SNS usage, using two dimensions: types of activities (contributing, sharing, consuming, searching, participating) and intensity of use (frequency and duration) (Bolton et al., 2013). Social media scholars broadly classify user activities based on the dichotomy of contribution (posting) and consumption (lurking or observing) (Heinonen, 2011; Schlosser, 2005; Shao, 2009). The present study examines both aspects of SNS users' activities by capturing their intentions to contribute/post or consume/lurk, as well as the engagement levels (frequency of active/passive engagement) within an integrated model. Previous research points out the importance of distinguishing between active and passive SNS engagement, and underscores the need to explore ways to encourage each level of engagement separately (Pagani et al., 2011).

Considering the fact that most online content is created by a minority of users (Lorenzo-Romero & Alarcón-del-Amo, 2012), managers need to identify users who can potentially help them grow their business. Investigating individual determinants of a member's intention to participate in SNS will allow SNS managers to design strategies that enhance the process of content production and consumption. In particular, considering personal traits routed in social sciences, such as time orientation, will add valuable knowledge towards understanding users' activity intentions and finally SNS engagement levels.

2.2. Time orientation and social networking sites

Studies examining individual traits as drivers of online behavior have focused on diverse topics, such as the impact of self-construal (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2012), self-esteem, self-efficacy, need for cognition, need to belong (Gangadharbatla, 2008), consumer innovativeness, expressiveness and propensity to share information (Pagani et al., 2011; Park et al., 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, no prior research has investigated the effects of time orientation on online behavior and SNS participation. This constitutes a remarkable research gap, as it

² In China, leading international SNS players, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, are blocked due to the "Great Firewall of China," i.e. Chinese government's internet censorship.

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